

Two weeks of steroid hell

Fitness fanatics are increasingly turning to drugs to bulk up, so *Helen Croydon* decided to try them

It is a criminal offence to sell steroids. Anyone caught doing so will be prosecuted," reads a sign in my London gym. The members seem decent, so I was surprised that steroids could be a problem.

"Some members said, 'I don't know if you know what's happening in the changing rooms but we think it's steroids because we see small packets,'" says Sara Dove, of the Manor Health Club. "We immediately launched a crackdown."

Anabolic steroids are a synthetic version

of the hormone testosterone, and promote the storage of protein and tissue growth. They can be used to treat wasting conditions, such as those caused by Aids, or to induce male puberty, but, increasingly, fitness enthusiasts use them to build up muscle size and strength.

I decided to investigate the issue in a TV documentary. Five fitness clubs out of ten I contacted said they had noticed a rise in members using or asking about steroids.

For many it can go wrong. In April this year, 17-year-old Matt Dear died from swelling to the brain after taking bodybuilding pills. It is thought he took the drugs to bulk up for selection into the Royal Marines. The same month, the Liberal Democrats uncovered figures showing a 42 per cent rise in the past five years in the number of under-18s admitted to hospital for steroid poisoning. For adults, the

increase was 64 per cent. The drugs are a Class C substance; it is legal to possess or import them for personal use, but illegal to supply them. They are easily obtained on the internet from sellers in countries where it is legal to supply without a prescription.

Anabolic steroids' potential side-effects include elevated blood pressure, changes to cholesterol levels, mood swings, acne and premature balding. In women, they can disrupt menstrual cycles, increase body hair and deepen the voice. They are most dangerous if the user doesn't know technical details about dose, diet, body recovery and cycles.

I found it startlingly easy to get hold of steroids online. I spent £42 on a course of Anabol, a brand of the compound methandrostenolone. Dr Ken Checinski, senior lecturer in addictive behaviour at St George's Hospital, London, warned me I



Weighty issue Helen Croydon found that steroids began affecting her within half an hour

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might see effects on my skin and mood within 72 hours, even on a 5mg daily dose.

I had planned to continue the Anabol for a month but after two weeks I had to stop. Within half an hour of taking a tablet I felt my heart rate increase and found it hard to concentrate. By Day 5 I had put on 4lb, was suffering headaches and having trouble sleeping. By Day 10 I had eczema and my period failed to start. I kept my gym routine the same, visiting four times a week. Yet my workouts felt less gruelling. I noticed my wrist aching after a gym session, so I assumed I had been lifting weights with more vigour than usual. After two weeks I had put on 9lb, I was tearful, impatient and hardly sleeping.

Despite the side-effects, I can see the appeal. I had a marked increase in muscle definition which, for a man, would be desirable. Mark Osbourne, a fitness trainer, explains. "Attention has shifted from fitness to body image. My male clients ask if I can build their chest and shoulders."

For my film, I followed 27-year-old Jan, who has used steroids for more than seven years. It is hard to ignore his lean, sculpted look. "When I was growing up I was skinny. Clothes wouldn't fit me and I got bullied," he says. "Then, at 17, I'd had enough so I took to the gym. I started with protein powders; one thing led to another and I started on steroids just before I turned 20."

Jan, like many users, wants to see anabolic steroids declassified. He believes that if they were sold over the counter people would seek advice and that it would stop amateur users damaging themselves. But Dr Checinski says that letting people take them freely would fuel the body-obsessed culture. "They can't be sold ethically over the counter — it'd lead to a surge in people taking them and becoming ill."

Steroids in our Gyms is broadcast as part of Current TV's *Wasted Britain* series, from September 28, 10pm

"Losing weight has brought us closer together"

Tom Sykes
How did I get here?



planned to go up to Dublin once a week specifically to counter rural insanity. We are only an hour away from the city, and a weekly expedition would offer a regular cultural infusion and some exposure to a more cosmopolitan circle of folk

long time to get the dough together, but that's OK — Bento started playschool only last week.

It sounds so obvious, but when you move somewhere new, you need to make